

An American Dilemma

PGeorge Shultz told a London audience the other day that Western nations should use whatever means necessary, including covert military aid, to support anti-Communist forces in such places as Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Nicaragua. But conspicuously missing from the Secretary of State's list was the Philippines.

Owing to important military bases there, vital U.S. interests are more certainly at stake in the Philippines than any of the other places Mr. Shultz mentioned. It was only four years ago, moreover, that Vice President George Bush journeyed to the Philippines to offer in an effusive inaugural toast the Reagan Administration's commitment to President Ferdinand Marcos.

"We love your adherence to democratic principles and to the democratic process," Mr. Bush gushed.

But no one doubts that Mr. Marcos's "pro-American" Government is now under severe challenge from a Communist insurgency — so much so that President Reagan recently dispatched his close friend, Senator Paul Laxalt, to Manila to warn Mr. Marcos that he was losing the battle, militarily and politically.

So why wasn't the Philippines on Mr. Shultz's list?

Because, it's reasonable to speculate, the Communist insurgency is not the only or even necessarily the most immediate of Mr. Marcos's problems; and because it can't be clear, even to the Reagan Administration, that backing him to the hilt is necessarily the best bet to stop a Communist takeover.

Accumulating charges of repression and corruption, and the assassination of a major political rival, Benigno Aquino, have shaken Mr. Marcos's hold on power and his standing among non-Communist Filipinos; now Gen. Fabian Ver and other military men whose responsibility for the killing had been strongly suggested by an investigating commission have been cleared by one of Mr. Marcos's courts, prompting complaint even from Washington.

Mr. Marcos has been forced to call a special election for Feb. 7 — although it's by no means sure that he aims to go through with it or to abide by the results, if unfavorable to him. He'll be opposed by Corazon Aquino, Benigno's widow, a powerful emotional symbol to anti-Marcos Filipinos, and her running mate, Salvador Laurel, the leader of a well-organized opposition party — a strong ticket in a clean election, democratically oriented and pro-U.S.

Here is a genuine American dilemma. Military men generally consider

the U.S. bases in the Philippines highly important; and although it's not clear to what extent, if any, the self-labeled Communist insurgents are linked to Moscow, preservation of the bases undoubtedly requires preservation of a pro-U.S. government.

If Mrs. Aquino could win, that might bring new life to a democratic tradition most Americans would like to think their earlier stewardship effectively planted in the Philippines; and even conservatives might agree that that would offer more hope of effective resistance to the Communist insurgency than a continuation of Mr. Marcos's repressive, corrupt regime. U.S. military and other aid almost surely would be more generously proffered by a Congress long suspicious of the Marcos Government's

Why isn't the Philippines on Shultz's list of forces fighting Reds?

will and ability to clean itself up and put down the rebellion.

On the other hand, the corrupt, strong-arm Marcos regime, long the recipient of undeviating U.S. support, might survive the February election by fair means or foul, only to crumble under the Communists' growing strength. Even if it didn't, Mr. Marcos hardly offers Filipinos the kind of democratic future Mr. Shultz extolled for Angolans, Afghans, Nicaraguans, etc.

On the other hand, any suggestion of U.S. support for Mrs. Aquino certainly would be denounced by the agile and vitriolic Mr. Marcos as unacceptable Yankee intervention in Philippine affairs; and might even give him an excuse to call off the election and return the nation to martial law. What effect any of that might have on the military bases is hard to estimate.

Mr. Shultz's case for interventionism is by no means proved; whether, for instance, "covert" aid for the Angolan rebels improves or worsens the American position in southern Africa remains to be seen. And the complex case of the Philippines suggests again that mere anti-Communism is not always a sufficient base for intelligent policy. □